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ABSTRACT

Racism, discrimination, and prejudice are typically viewed from the perspective of the disadvantaged ethnic minority, but another approach is to address the advantages of whites. There is one culture that is usually invisible to whites, and that is "whiteness." To grow up white is to be the focal point from which others differ. Whites grapple with the issue of racism in various ways, but one factor that can be associated with a high level of cultural competence is the recognition of white privilege. Twenty-five examples are given of the types of privilege whites typically enjoy. Most keep whites from having reason to be angry about race and ethnic discrimination. The lack of awareness, denial, and silence about white privilege is the fuel that perpetuates the advantages and freedoms whites have. White supremacist is a label usually associated with extremist groups, but whites who do not acknowledge that they are privileged still accept and benefit from unearned public and private power, embodying and enacting white supremacy regardless of how nonracist their beliefs may be. Latinos and other people of color may find that the items on the white privilege list are obvious, but they are not obvious to white people. Research has also shown that whites have the misperception that ethnic minorities have achieved equality with whites. (SLD)

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Unveiling White Privilege

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A PUBLICATION ABOUT LATINOS IN COLORADO

Latin American Research and Service Agency (LARASA) November, 1995

UNVEILING WHITE PRIVILEGE

Racial division is tearing at the fabric of America The differing views on affirmative action is one example of the polarization of America regarding race. Racism, discrimination, and prejudice are typically viewed from the perspective of the disadvantaged ethnic minority. Another perspective of racism is to address the advantages of Whites. White people are taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage but are not taught to see that it puts Whites in a privileged position of having certain advantages.[1] What does "freedom of being White" mean and what is it like to have "White privilege"?

THE FREEDOM OF BEING WHITE

There is one culture that is usually invisible to Whites - whiteness. White is the race that doesn't need to speak its name. To grow up White is to be the focal point from which everyone else differs. Race is about somebody else. If race is a problem, it's somebody else's problem.[2] Whites in the U.S. typically think that racism doesn't affect them because they are not people of color; they do not see "whiteness" as a racial identity.[1]

Whites grapple with the issue of racism in a number of ways, ranging from color blindness to identifying White privilege. There are varying degrees of understanding cultural competency and diversity. At one end of the continuum is cultural destructiveness, an extreme position which assumes that one race is superior and should eradicate "lesser" cultures because of their perceived subhuman position. In the middle of this continuum is cultural blindness with the view that if the system worked as it should, all people - regardless of race or ethnicity - would be served with equal effectiveness. At the other end of the continuum is cultural competence characterized by acceptance of and respect for cultural difference.[3]

> *Whether through the curriculum or in the newspaper, the television, the economic system, or the general look of people in the streets, we received daily signals and indications that my people [Whites] counted, and that others either didn't exist or must be trying, not very successfully, to be like people of my race. We were given cultural permission not to hear voices of people of other races, or a tepid cultural tolerance for hearing or acting on such voices.*[1]
>
> Peggy McIntosh

One factor that can be associated with a high level of cultural competency is the recognition of White privilege. Following are 25 examples of the privileges White people automatically enjoy. These examples were selected from a list created by Peggy McIntosh. These are privileges and freedoms that most Whites often take for granted and erroneously assume other races enjoy the same freedoms. The inability to exchange the group White with Latino in the listed statements demonstrates the privilege experienced by Whites.

In these examples of White privilege some make persons feel at home in the world, others allow Whites to escape penalties or dangers that others suffer. Through some, Whites can escape fear or a sense of not being welcome. Some keep Whites from having to negotiate each transaction from the position of being an outsider. Most keep Whites from having reason to be angry about race and ethnic discrimination.[1]

Examples of White Privilege
by Peggy McIntosh

1. If they wish, Whites can arrange to be in the company of other White people most of the time.

2. Whites can be sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area they can afford and choose to live.

3. Whites can be confident that if they move to a new neighborhood of their choice, their neighbors will be neutral or pleasant to them.

4. Whites can go shopping alone without worry of being followed or harassed.

5. Whites can turn on the television or open the newspaper and see people of their race widely and positively represented.

6. When told of America's national heritage or about "civilization," Whites are shown as those that made it what it is.

7. White children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.

8. Whether using checks, credit cards, or cash, Whites can count on their skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.

9. Whites do not have to educate their children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.

10. Whites can be confident that their children's teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms without being concerned about others' attitudes toward their race.

11. Whites can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to their race.

12. Whites are not asked to speak for all persons of their racial group.

13. Whites can be confident that if they ask to talk to "the person in charge," they will be facing a person of their own race.

14. If Whites get pulled over by a police officer, they can be confident they haven't been singled out because of their race.

15. Whites can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys and children's magazines featuring people of their own race.

16. Whites can go home from most meetings of organizations they belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.

17. When Whites address racial issues, being White lends them more credibility whether they are for or against the issue compared to a person of color addressing the same opinion of those issues.

18. Whites can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.

19. Whites can accept a job with an affirmative action employer without having their co-workers suspect they got the job because of their race.

20. If a White person's day, week, or year is going badly, they need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.

21. Whites can think over many options, be it social, political, imaginative, or professional, without questioning whether a person of their race would be accepted or allowed to do what they want to do.

22. Whites can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of their race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places they have chosen.

23. Whites can be confident that if they need legal or medical help, their race will not work against them.

24. When Whites have low credibility as a leader, they can be sure that their race is not the problem.

25. Whites can easily find academic courses and institutions that give attention only to people of their race.

If these things are true, this is not such a free country; one's life is not what one makes it; many doors open for certain people through no virtues of their own. The appearance of being a good citizen rather than a troublemaker comes in large part from having all sorts of doors open automatically because of my [White] color. [1]

Peggy McIntosh

White people often are unwilling to recognize they enjoy special privileges even though they may admit non-Whites are at a disadvantage in our society. By denying this special freedom, White privilege is protected from being fully recognized, acknowledge, lessened, or ended.

What is also disturbing is that some of the items on the White privilege list, like the expectation that neighbors will be decent to you, or that your race will not count against you in court, should be the norm in a just society. Everyone should have the "privilege" of belonging. The feeling that one belongs within the human circle should be an entitlement that doesn't have to be earned.[1]

PRIVILEGE WIELDS POWER

The lack of awareness, denial, and silence about White privilege is the fuel that perpetuates the advantages and freedom Whites have. It is this lack of awareness about White advantage that perpetuates the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all. Blindness to unearned privileges keeps Whites ignorant of their self-imposed dominance fostering their power and subsequently fosters racism in society.[1]

There is a solidarity among Whites created from a bonding process that Whites engage in everyday. Whites interact in a way that affirms a common stance on race-related issues and draws conspiratorial "us-them" boundaries.[4]

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Subtle behavior such as race-related "asides" in conversations, strategic eye-contact, and jokes form these bonds. Often, comments or looks are so short and subtle that they seem relatively harmless.

White racial bonding and the pressure to "fit in" will affect Whites who are uncertain about their own racial beliefs and loyalties reinforcing prejudices and stereotypes regarding people of color.[4] Even silence serves as agreement communicating solidarity and demarcating racial lines.[4] Sleeter states, "Many whites who do not support racist beliefs, actions, or policies, but who also do not want to risk breaking bonds with other whites, simply remain silent."[4]

A Latino organization broaching the topic of White racism takes on considerable more risk of being seen as militant or not being taken seriously than if a report was published by a government office such as the U.S. General Accounting Office. Conversely, Whites do not have a great deal to lose when supporting ethnic minority issues nor do Whites have a great deal to lose by opposing these issues.[1]

In my class and place, I did not see myself as racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth. I was taught to think that racism could end if white individuals change their attitudes... A "white" skin in the United States opens many doors for whites whether or not we approve of the way dominance has been conferred on us.[1]

Peggy McIntosh

WHITE SUPREMACY BROADLY DEFINED

"White supremacist" is a label usually associated with extremist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. Yet Whites who do not acknowledge they are privileged still accept and benefit from unearned public and private power they are given. They embody and enact "White supremacy" regardless of how non-racist they believe themselves to be. Whites can think they are decent, fair, and sympathetic regarding racism but can still be considered White supremacists

Table 1

Beliefs Ethnic Minorities Have About Whites in the U.S.			
	Latino	African American	Asian
Whites are insensitive and have a history of bigotry and prejudice	56%	76%	54%
Whites feel they are superior and can boss others around	52%	79%	45%
Whites control power and wealth and do not want to share it	52%	76%	34%

Source: Gonzalez, Christian R. "Survey Reveals Tensions Among Groups." Hispanic Link Weekly Report, March 14, 1994.

unless they actively disown and work against inherited racial systems.[1]

An institution, business or individual may proclaim that they will "prohibit racism" in their environment. Perhaps McIntosh is more realistic by saying that "after all these centuries of White privilege, no one can simply declare White privilege prohibited, starting today. But first, we need public and private awareness that White privilege exists."[1]

It is unlikely that the majority of Whites are truly distressed about systemic, unearned White advantage and self-imposed dominance. White privilege is a concept that is difficult for Whites to understand. It is very hard to give up anything once the system is working for you.

BEING LATINO IN A WHITE SOCIETY

When issues of race relations are discussed in this country, they are discussed in terms of the African American and White communities. But what of Latinos and other persons of color regarding the issues of racism and civil rights? Ironically, the racial classification of Latinos is White, yet Latinos face the same social and economic struggles as African Americans and Native Americans. In addition, Latinos face prejudice regarding immigration, bilingual education, and English only laws. Latinos may be classified as White, but they have different views of race relations than European Whites. In a national survey, over half of Latinos believed Whites have a history of bigotry and prejudice and that they control power and wealth but do not want to share it (Table 1).

Latinos and other people of color may find that the items on the White privilege list were obvious, but they are not obvious to White people.[1] While studies and statistics show that social and economic equality does not exist among races, Whites still have the misperception that ethnic minorities have achieved equality with Whites.

A 1994 survey of 3,000 persons nationwide revealed the lack of understanding Whites have about the privileges of ethnic minorities. This survey revealed that between 54 and 74 percent of Whites believed Latinos and African Americans have access to skilled jobs, decent housing, and financial credit. The majority of Whites also believed that Latinos and African American have access to equal education, equal justice, receive equal pay for equal work, receive equal treatment by the media and equal treatment by police.[5]

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